Adam and Eve in Ancient Gnostic Literature and 1 Timothy 2:13-14

March 9, 2015 1 Timothy 2:12, All Posts on Equality, Church History, Paul and Women
1 Timothy 2:13-14, Adam and Eve, Ancient Ephesus, Eve's Deception, First Timothy, Gnosticism

INTRODUCTION

In other articles on this website I have suggested that the heresy in Ephesus—which motivated Paul to write his first letter to Timothy—was a kind of pre-Gnostic or syncretistic heresy (cf. 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 2:5; 4:1-4, 7; 6:20; etc).[1] I have also previously suggested that 1 Timothy 2:13-14 was written to correct heretical ideas concerning Adam and Eve.

Several ancient texts (discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt) show that the biblical creation accounts were interpreted freely and allegorically in the first few centuries of the common era. In some of these texts, Eve is depicted as a powerful force while Adam is passive.

One of my readers wanted more information about these texts and wanted to check them for herself. So in this post I provide links to Gnostic works that present Eve in a very different light to how the Bible presents her. In these texts, Eve is sometimes described as Adam's teacher. She is also depicted as superior to Adam, as preceding him, or as giving life to him in some way.

The links to these texts, along with a few sample quotes, are provided to show the plausibility that 1 Timothy 2:13-14 was written to correct a faulty understanding that Eve was created first and that she was neither deceived nor a sinner.

Most of the texts are not long but, if you want to read only the pertinent sentences, I suggest searching

Most of the texts are not long but, if you want to read only the pertinent sentences, I suggest searching the texts using the word "Adam". [To search, go to the text online, press and hold Ctrl and then press the letter F key. Then type in the word "Adam" in the field that pops up.]

Reading the Gnostic texts is one thing, understanding them is another. To help in understanding, it is important to note that "Eve" is equivalent to the Greek word "Zoe," and that both words mean "Life".[2] Eve, or Zoe, is portrayed in some texts as the daughter or messenger of the divine "Sophia." (Sophia is considered by some Gnostics as the feminine hypostasis, or manifestation, of the Godhead.) Other Gnostic terms are applied to other "heavenly projections" of Eve, such as "Epinoia" (a Greek word which, in other contexts, typically means "thought").

A SELECTION OF GNOSTIC TEXTS

Apocalypse of Adam (c. 50-150)

In this work, Adam speaks and says that Eve "taught me a word of knowledge of the eternal God." The text thus refers to Eve as a teacher of theological knowledge.
Online text and commentary.

Thunder, Perfect Mind (c. 100-230)

This text contains the ramblings of a woman called "Life" (i.e. Zoe, a.k.a Eve). Unlike what the title suggests, this piece of writing is not conducive or indicative of a perfect mind. This piece is not especially helpful in discussing the heresy of 1 Timothy 2:12 but lends weight to the idea that some strands of Judaism and early Christianity held to strange ideas about Eve.
Online text and commentary.

Gospel of Philip (c. 180-250)

This work is even weirder. It states that Adam came into being through two virgins, one of whom is Spirit and seems to be Eve.
Online text and commentary.

The Apocryphon of John (c. 120-180)

This book portrays Eve as a teacher of Adam.

> And he sent, through his beneficent Spirit and his great mercy, a helper to Adam, luminous Epinoia which comes out of him, who is called "Life" (*Zoe*). And she assists the whole creature, by toiling with him and by restoring him to his fullness and by teaching him about the descent of his seed

with him and by restoring him to his fullness and by teaching him about the descent of his seed (and) by teaching him about the way of ascent, (which is) the way he came down.

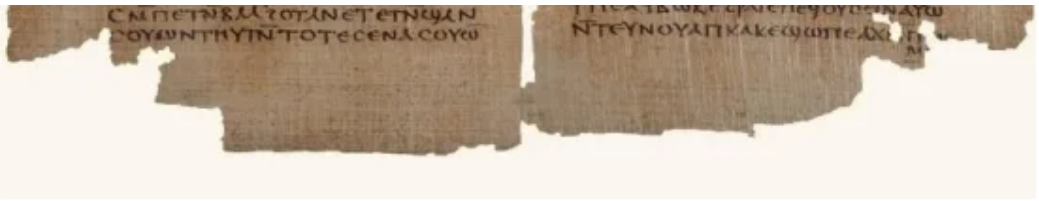
In this passage Eve is shown as superior to Adam.

> I am the light which exists in the light, I am the remembrance of the Pronoia—that I might enter into the midst of darkness and the inside of Hades. And I filled my face with the light of the completion of their aeon. And I entered into the midst of their prison, which is the prison of the body. And I said, 'He who hears, let him get up from the deep sleep.' And he wept and shed tears. Bitter tears he wiped from himself and he said, 'Who is it that calls my name, and from where has this hope come to me, while I am in the chains of the prison?' And I said, 'I am the Pronoia of the pure light; I am the thinking of the virginal Spirit, who raised you up to the honored place. Arise and remember that it is you who hearkened, and follow your root, which is I, the merciful one, and guard yourself against the angels of poverty and the demons of chaos and all those who ensnare you, and beware of the deep sleep and the enclosure of the inside of Hades.

Stephan A. Hoeller, a Gnostic scholar and Gnostic believer, comments on this passage and writes,

> Nowhere is Eve's superiority and numinous power more evident than in her role as Adam's awakener. Adam is in a deep sleep, from which Eve's liberating call arouses him. While the orthodox version has Eve physically emerge from Adam's body, the Gnostic rendering has the spiritual principle known as Eve emerging from the unconscious depths of the somnolent Adam.[3]

Online text and commentary



The first two pages of *The Apocryphon of John* from a book found at Nag Hammadi.

The Hypostasis of the Archons (c. 200-300 CE)

This long text is an esoteric interpretation of Genesis chapters 1-6. It includes several passages about Adam and Eve including the following where Adam acknowledges that Eve has given him life.

> The rulers took counsel with one another and said, "Come, let us cause a deep sleep to fall upon Adam." And he slept. – Now the deep sleep that they "caused to fall upon him, and he slept" is Ignorance. – They opened his side like a living woman. And they built up his side with some flesh in place of her, and Adam came to be endowed only with soul. And the spirit-endowed woman came to him and spoke with him, saying, "Arise, Adam." And when he saw her, he said, "It is you who have given me life; you will be called 'mother of the living'. – For it is she who is my mother. It is she who is the physician, and the woman, and she who has given birth.

Also, *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (or *The Nature of the Rulers*) refers to the serpent as "The Teacher" who is guided by the feminine principle which mystically inhabits it. The Serpent is portrayed in a somewhat positive manner which is very different to the biblical account where the serpent is cursed by God for bringing about the downfall of Adam and Eve.

This Gnostic text is disturbing because of the way it portrays God. Gnostics believe that the Creator is demented and distant; and "the rulers" (*archons*) in this text (which parallel God in Genesis 1 but with corrupted twists) are described as arrogant, as giving humans a hard time, and even as spiteful. Online text and commentary.

The Origin of the World (c. 270-330)

This work is difficult to follow and contains the following enigmatic passage about Eve.:

> When Sophia let fall a droplet of light, it flowed onto the water, and immediately a human being appeared, being androgynous. That droplet she molded first as a female body. Afterwards, using the body she molded it in the likeness of the mother, which had appeared. And he finished it in twelve months. An androgynous human being was produced, whom the Greeks call Hermaphrodites; and whose mother the Hebrews call Eve of Life (*Zoe*), namely, the female instructor of life. Her offspring is the creature that is lord. Afterwards, the authorities called it "beast", so that it might lead astray their modelled creatures. The interpretation of "the beast" is

> "the instructor". For it was found to be the wisest of all beings.

And this:

> Now, Eve is the first virgin, the one who without a husband bore her first offspring. It is she who served as her own midwife. For this reason she is held to have said:
>
> It is I who am the part of my mother; and it is I who am the mother.
> It is I who am the wife; it is I who am the virgin.
> It is I who am pregnant; it is I who am the midwife.
> It is I who am the one that comforts pains of travail.
> It is my husband who bore me; and it is I who am his mother.
> And it is he who is my father and my lord.
> It is he who is my force; What he desires, he says with reason.
> I am in the process of becoming; yet I have borne a man as lord.

In this passage, Adam (again) claims that Eve has given him life, and that she has preceded him:

> After the day of rest, Sophia sent her daughter Zoe, being called Eve, as an instructor, in order that she might make Adam, who had no soul, arise, so that those whom he should engender might become containers of light. When Eve saw her male counterpart prostrate, she had pity upon him, and she said, "Adam! Become alive! Arise upon the earth!" Immediately her word became accomplished fact. For Adam, having arisen, suddenly opened his eyes. When he saw her, he said, "You shall be called 'Mother of the Living'. For it is you who have given me life."

Online text and commentary.

PROTO-GNOSTICISM IN THE EPHESIAN CHURCH

Many of these Gnostic writings were penned after First Timothy was written. However, some of these heretical ideas were, most likely, circulating for years before they were written down. A few of these ideas may have some similarities with the heresy at Ephesus.

Cerinthus was a well-known proto-Gnostic teacher who had come to Ephesus from Alexandria some time in the latter half of the first century.[4] Like his compatriot Philo of Alexandria, Cerinthus favoured allegorical interpretations of Old Testament scripture. Yet we do not know what Cerinthus thought or taught about Adam and Eve.

Revelation 2:6 mentions that there was a heretical sect known as the Nicolaitans in Ephesus, but we know little about this relatively short-lived group. It is within First Timothy itself that there are the strongest clues about the nature of the heresy at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3-7; 2:5, 15; 4:1-4, 7; 6:20). These

clues led men such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Eusebius to link the heresy in First Timothy with the Gnosticism they knew in the second and third centuries.[5]

Unlike the elaborate Gnostic stories, Paul gives a succinct and straightforward summary of the biblical account of creation and the Fall, albeit leaving out the bit that Adam was also a sinner.

> For Adam was formed first, *then* Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; *it was the woman* who was deceived and became a sinner. 1 Timothy 2:13-14 (Italics added.)

Paul may well have written this to correct the false notion, evident in some later Gnostic writings, that Eve was created first and then Adam, and that Adam was the one deceived.[6] More on 1 Timothy 2:13 here.

> Is there a connection between the Gnostic Adam and Eve and Paul's correction in 1 Timothy 2:13-14?
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Footnotes

[1] Scholars are increasingly reluctant to call syncretistic religious beliefs before the second century AD "Gnosticism". In the context of the letter to the Ephesians, which, like the letters to Timothy, was written in the late first century, Clinton Arnold is wary about calling the heresy in Ephesus "Gnosticism" but concedes:

> A total dismissal of all Gnostic interpretation of Ephesians would not be a proper conclusion to draw . . . . Even if the thoroughgoing dualism characteristic of fully developed Gnosis cannot be demonstrated before A.D. 135 . . . , other streams of religious influence (with permutations already in process) may have existed which had a profound impact on developing Gnosis. One or a number of these merging streams may have been converging in the first century forming the beginning of Gnosis.
> Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12.

[2] Curiously, the Septuagint (the Greek New Testament) has "Zoe" in Genesis 3:20, but "Eva" in Genesis 4:1.

[3] Stephan A. Hoeller, *The Genesis Factor*, published in Quest, September 1997. Available online at The Gnosis Archive here.

[4] According to Ernest Renan, Cerinthus was "considered to be the bitter opponent of Paul." "Chapter XVIII Ephesus—The Old Age of John—Cerinthus—Docetism", *History of the Origins of Christianity. Book V. The Gospels*, 219. (Source) It is more certain, however, that Cerinthus was an opponent of John who, in

The Gospels, 219. (Source) It is more certain, however, that Cerinthus was an opponent of John who, in later life, lived in Ephesus. John may have had Cerinthus in mind when he wrote 1 John 2:22-23.
There is a much-repeated story that John ran out of a bathhouse in Ephesus when he discovered Cerinthus was inside. John ran out yelling, "Let's get out of here in case the bathhouse falls down for Cerinthus the enemy of truth is inside." Ireneaus, *Against Heresies,* 3.3.4.
Epiphanius, who is not a reliable source of information, claims that Cerinthus was from Asia Minor and began his teaching there. He also claims that Cerinthus was already causing trouble in the mid-first century and that Acts 15:24 refers to him and other Judaisers like him. Panarion Book 1 28.

[5] More about how these early church writers linked the Ephesian heresy with second-century Gnosticism is here.

[6] In 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul uses the unusual verb *authentein*. Albert Wolters writes about a cognate noun of *authentein* and its association with Gnosticism,

> It is noteworthy that the word *authentia* played a prominent role in Gnosticism; for example it was the name of the supreme deity in the systems of the early Gnostics Cerinthus and Saturninus, and in the Gnostic writing Poimandres (first and second centuries AD).
> "A Semantic Study of *Authentēs* and its Derivatives" in the *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 1/11 (Spring 2006), 50. This paper can be viewed here.

The noun *authentia* is typically translated into English as "supreme power" in works by Early Church Fathers who addressed Christian Gnosticism. The infinitive *authentein*, sometimes translated as "to have authority over" in 1 Timothy 2:12, does not refer to a usual kind of authority. Is there an allusion to Gnosticism in Paul's use of the word *authentein*? More on *authentein* here.

Postscript: November 14, 2019

Tatian, a second-century Christian teacher with unorthodox ideas, denied that Adam was saved. In *Against Heresies* 1.28.1, Irenaeus says this was a recent idea and unique to Tatian. But I do wonder if the idea was circulating earlier and if it has anything to do with Paul's correction in 1 Timothy 2:14, "And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner."

> Springing from Saturninus and Marcion, those who are called Encratites (self-controlled) preached against marriage, thus setting aside the original creation of God, and indirectly blaming Him who made the male and female for the propagation of the human race. Some of those reckoned among them have also introduced abstinence from animal food, thus proving themselves ungrateful to God, who formed all things. They deny, too, the salvation of him who was first created. It is but lately, however, that this opinion has been invented among them. A certain man named Tatian first introduced the blasphemy. He was a hearer of Justin's [Justin Martyr], and as long as he continued with him he expressed no such views; but after his martyrdom he separated from the Church, and, excited and puffed up by the thought of being a teacher, as if he were superior to others, he

> composed his own peculiar type of doctrine. He invented a system of certain invisible Æons, like the followers of Valentinus; while, like Marcion and Saturninus, he declared that marriage was nothing else than corruption and fornication. But his denial of Adam's salvation was an opinion due entirely to himself. *Against Heresies* 1.28.1

Images

(1) William Blake, *Eve tempted by the Serpent*, c.1796 (Wikimedia)
(2) The first two pages of *The Apocryphon of John* from a book found in Nag Hammadi. (Wikimedia)

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7 thoughts on "Adam and Eve in Ancient Gnostic Literature and 1 Timothy 2:13-14"

Cassandra Wright
March 9, 2015

I am truly convinced that Paul was writing against Gnosticism in his letters to Timothy. When we also consider that odd word in I Tim 2 about "authority," it works out better with the idea of "usurping" that simply having it. I can really picture these Gnostic women coming in and trying to take over, "correcting" the

preaching of the Christians. That ties together much better. Of no one should usurp someone else's authority, but this was a personal letter about a specific topic.

Gnostic thought also helps with that confusing verse at the end of I Tim 2 about a woman or women being safe in childbirth. Since material things were seen as evil to gnostics, it was evil to create a child. Perhaps the verse is really teaching that a new Christian woman giving birth was not evil and she would not be punished or her soul harmed.

SO much we don't understand. Yet people act like those verses are perfectly clear and make eternal rules out of them. How presumptuous.

Reply

Marg

March 10, 2015

Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Eusebius believed that the heresy addressed in 1 Timothy was an early, emerging form of Gnosticism. And I agree, Gnosticism helps to make sense of 1 Timothy 2:15. So does the emphasis on sexual asceticism in the early church. I write about asceticism and 1 Timothy 2:15 here.

English translations make it sound straightforward, but the Greek raises some perplexing issues. For example, the Greek word *authentein* which, despite appearances, is not etymologically related to the English word "authority" may mean something entirely different in 1 Timothy 2:12, especially considering how the cognate nouns *authentia* and *authentēs* are used.

For an explanation that strains credulity, here's John Piper's take on 1 Tim 2:12 which he provides when answering the question, "Can a Woman Preach If Elders Affirm It?" His answer is "no".

Reply

To all here, you will find another article stating much the same information

judy

March 17, 2015

halfway down the page at

http://godswordtowomen.org/fees.htm

By Don Rousu from Alberta Canada, it corroborates much of the teaching here… and ends with a paraphrase of 1 Tim 2:11-14.

If he and this writer are correct, we have wasted the lives of multiplied thousands of women with our determination to avoid higher learning and context in many churches.

I would like to add that so many men have been deceived throughout history, namely leading a multitude of false cults, that to accept females as solely deceived is nonsense.

Reply

Curious Thinker

March 20, 2015

Very interesting. I assumed that Paul was refererring a cult of Artemis where taught that women were descendants of the Amazon tribe and women's superiority where Eve was created first and women would be saved in childbirth from Artemis the fertility goddess. I wasn't even aware of the Gnostic teachings but that was fasinating. Great post once again.

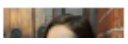
Reply

Marg

March 20, 2015

I'm pretty sure Artemis was making her presence felt in some way in the Ephesian church, but there is perhaps some evidence that directly connects the Ephesian church with a gnostic-like heresy that also involves ascetism.

Reply



Krysta

December 22, 2015

This is amazing!! I was just reading in Kostenberger's "Women in the Church" and he talks about how Artemis isn't directly mentioned or even implied in the Pastoral Epistles. We can't determine how much that cult affected the church but I found it interesting to learn about the early church's struggle with gnosticism! Now we have TWO possible sources of influence that required Paul's correction of their skewed creation account in 1 Timothy 2:13-14! Fascinating! My husband poo-pooed my idea that Paul was correcting false teaching there and NOT giving a permanent reason for his prohibition rooted in creation order! But gnosticism fits the bill, even when it comes to women being fearful of bearing children! It makes so much sense to me! I really had no idea what gnosticism was or that it had infiltrated the church much less that they believed that Eve was superior to Adam! Amazing! I was researching it and Google suggested you Marg! I was like, "Yes! A source I can trust!"! Thanks Marg!

Reply

Jean

May 25, 2016

This is really fascinating. I consider myself fairly well read, but I didn't know these early gnostic texts existed, much less were prominent. Your explanation makes a whole lot more sense than the universal prohibition that is preached in many conservative/reformed circles. Thanks for the food for thought!

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